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ONE HUNDRED NINTH CONGRESS

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

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October 12, 2005

Mr. Claude Allen  
Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy  
The White House  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. Allen:

I have become aware that a recent conference about abstinence-only-until-marriage education, you made inaccurate statements about the 4parents.gov website run by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). You claimed that all Congressional concerns about the accuracy and appropriateness of the website had been addressed. In fact, I have never received a response to a letter I sent on July 13, 2005, to Secretary of Health and Human Services Michael O. Leavitt outlining serious concerns of several national experts in adolescent health. I urge you to review the attached materials and ensure that the Department responds promptly.

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) launched the 4parents.gov website in March of 2005 as a resource to "equip parents to talk with their teens about sex and relationships while encouraging them to remain abstinent from unhealthy behaviors."<sup>1</sup> After members of the public health community raised concerns about the website, I asked four leading experts in the health fields addressed by 4parents.gov to review the website. The reviewers, experts in the fields of infectious disease, adolescent sexuality, reproductive health, and adolescent development, found that the site did not accurately reflect the scientific consensus on multiple key issues in adolescent health.<sup>2</sup> Among their observations, they found:

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Health and Human Services, *HHS Announces Communication Tools To Help Parents Talk To Their Teens About Abstinence* (Mar. 25, 2005) (online at [www.hhs.gov/news/press/2005pres/20050325.html](http://www.hhs.gov/news/press/2005pres/20050325.html)).

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Henry A. Waxman, Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Government Reform to Michael O. Leavitt, Secretary, Department of Health and Human Services (July 13, 2005) (online at: [democrats.reform.house.gov/story.asp?ID=888](http://democrats.reform.house.gov/story.asp?ID=888)).

- **4parents.gov provides inaccurate information on sexually transmitted diseases.** According to the experts, the website understates the effectiveness of condoms, provides wrong information about HIV and other sexually transmitted disease, misstates the relative risks of different types of sexual behaviors, and inappropriately relies on *Seventeen* magazine for scientific information.
- **4parents.gov conveys a message on contraception that is likely to backfire.** According to the experts, the website's virtually exclusive focus on instructing parents to tell their teenagers to be abstinent will leave youth more likely to have unprotected sex. One expert stated that the website "virtually abandons parents whose children are sexually active, providing them with no guidance in helping their children understand how to reduce their risks."<sup>3</sup>
- **4parents.gov uses inappropriate language on issues such as sexual-orientation and single-parenting.** One expert criticized the website's reference to homosexuality as a "lifestyle" and failure to address the harmful effects of stigma and harassment against homosexual adolescents.<sup>4</sup> Another expert noted that the website's "not-so-subtle suggestion that divorce and single parenthood are responsible for the nation's social ills will alienate many potential users of the site, a large proportion of whom are themselves single parents with adolescent children."<sup>5</sup>

In a July 13 letter, I brought these concerns to Secretary Leavitt's attention. The experts' review of the 4parents website was also covered widely in the press.<sup>6</sup> Soon after I sent the letter, Senator Arlen Specter added language to the report on the appropriations bill for HHS urging that the 4parents.gov website be reviewed by public health and scientific experts.<sup>7</sup>

On August 5, 2005, you discussed 4parents.gov at the "International Abstinence Leadership Conference," an annual conference of over one thousand abstinence-only-until-

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<sup>3</sup> Letter from John Santelli, M.D., M.P.H. to Henry A. Waxman, Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Government Reform, U.S. House of Representatives (May 1, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Richard R. Pleak, M.D. to Henry A. Waxman, Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Government Reform, U.S. House of Representatives (June 7, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Laurence Steinberg, Ph.D. to Henry A. Waxman, Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Government Reform, U.S. House of Representatives (May 2, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> E.g., *Panel Finds Misinformation in White House Web Site on Teenagers*, Washington Post (July 14, 2005); *Website Gives Parents Biased Advice, Lawmaker Charges*, USA Today (July 14, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> *Health Website Faces Scrutiny*, Los Angeles Times (July 16, 2005).

Mr. Claude Allen  
October 12, 2005  
Page 3

marriage educators.<sup>8</sup> In your plenary address, you acknowledged that HHS had received a numbers of concerns about the information presented on the 4parents.gov website, including from "members of Congress." You then stated: "We've gone back to them about it [and] made it very clear that while they might have a disagreement with that information, it is based on fact, based on science, based on research."<sup>9</sup>

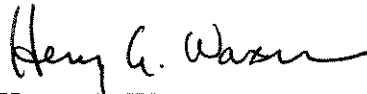
In fact, since sending the letter, I have received no response.

You also mischaracterized the process by which the 4parents.gov website was created. You stated that "the people at HHS ... worked hard at creating these resources, consulted a variety of data, scientific research, as well as medical and health experts, to ensure that the information provided was accurate and up to date."<sup>10</sup> This portrayal of the website is inaccurate. In fact, the content in the website was not created by government scientists, but rather through a no-bid contract to the National Physician's Center for Family Resources, an obscure organization that has taken positions against scientific agencies on important matters of public health.<sup>11</sup>

In my letter to Secretary Leavitt, I asked him how the contract came to be awarded to an organization with questionable credentials, particularly without a bidding process. I also asked what, if any, peer review had been conducted by government scientists or outside experts. These are important questions that deserve answers.

I am enclosing my letter to Secretary Leavitt, as well as the four experts' full reviews of the website. I ask that you ensure a response is sent by October 28, 2005.

Sincerely,



Henry A. Waxman  
Ranking Minority Member

Enclosure

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<sup>8</sup> Remarks by Claude Allen at the International Abstinence Leadership Conference, *All the President's Men: Domestic Policy* (Aug. 5, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> Letter to Secretary Leavitt, *supra* note 2.